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A whole new arsenal for the Watergate skeptics!

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Saga suggests CIA duplicity brought Nixon down

As John Dean wrote in his book *Blind Ambition*, "it's incredible. Millions of dollars have been spent investigating Watergate. A president has been forced out of office. Dozens of lives have been ruined. We're sitting in the can. And still nobody can explain why they bugged the place to begin with."

For most Americans, Watergate symbolizes the struggle between a "duplicitous, authoritarian, and vengeful" president on the one hand, and tireless advocates of the public good on the other.

According to the accepted history of the affair, individuals working for the Nixon re-election campaign broke into the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate during May and June of 1972. The purpose of the break-in was to bug the phones of two DNC officials for political intelligence. In order to repair a wiretap on one of the phones, a second break-in was undertaken on the night of June 16-17. The burglary was discovered, the culprits arrested.

Almost immediately, a connection was established to the administration of President Richard M. Nixon, but the White House began a massive cover-up. Only through the diligence of certain reporters, prosecutors, and members of Congress was the whole affair resolved when the president resigned in disgrace, revealing the sordidness of his entire administration for all to see.

One does not have to be an admirer of the Nixon presidency to recognize that there are just too many holes in the received Watergate saga to justify many of the conclusions that have been drawn. Now skeptics have been provided with a whole arsenal of new ammunition, thanks to Jim Hougan's new book.

Mr. Hougan — his two earlier books were *Decadence* and *Spooks* — has written a "political detective story" that offers a great deal of new evidence in the form of FBI documents pertaining to Watergate, almost none of which were available to the Senate committee chaired by Sen. Sam Ervin of North Carolina. In addition, by employing the Sherlock Holmes technique of asking why the dog didn't bark, the author throws new light on old evidence.

By concentrating on the break-in itself rather than on the cover-up, as others have done, Mr. Hougan arrives at some startling conclusions: Howard Hunt and James McCord were still working for the CIA during the time they were ostensibly employed by the Nixon re-election campaign, and were engaged in domestic intelligence operations which included spying on the administration itself.

McCord's real targets, for which the Watergate operation was a cover, were the clients of prostitutes working out of the Columbia Plaza apartments, not far from the Watergate. In order to protect the real CIA operation, which was in danger of being compromised by the Committee to Re-elect the President enterprise, Hunt and McCord sabotaged the Watergate break-in, duping G. Gordon Liddy along the way.

Then, the CIA manipulated the story by means of connections with the press, in particular the editors and reporters of *The Washington Post*, again diverting attention toward the cover-up and away from the agency's own operation.

**Secret Agenda: Watergate,
Deep Throat and the CIA**
By Jim Hougan
Random House, \$19.95, 347 pages

As might be expected, such conclusions are not always as clearly supported by the evidence as one would wish, but even in those areas where Mr. Hougan's reasoning is strained, his position is at least as plausible as that established by the received history.

In the course of his narrative, Mr. Hougan calls attention to some interesting connections that in themselves might cast doubt on the accepted version of Watergate:

- Post reporter Bob Woodward's extensive background in naval intelligence and his role on a special intelligence briefing team that provided him access to high-level intelligence sources, one of which may have been "Deep Throat."

- Second Post reporter Carl Bernstein's connection to the "notorious Washington pimp" Buster Riggan, who was associated with prostitutes at the Columbia Plaza, and the journalist's participation in a "swingles" club involving CIA officers, their wives, and girlfriends.

- The relationship between Mr. Woodward's source, Robert Bennett, and the CIA; and the threads linking Mr. Bennett, the lawyer Edward Bennett Williams, Judge John Sirica, the Democrats, and the editors and publisher of *The Post*.

While these interesting (but unknown or ignored) connections may have only had a circumstantial relationship to the way the Watergate story has emerged, the fact remains that they are possible explanations for why the dog didn't bark.

While *Secret Agenda* may serve to deflate the reputations of the "investigative journalists" and certain partisan hacks who labored so strenuously to bring down the president and all his men, its conclusions cannot but trouble those of us who love constitutional republican government. For if Mr. Hougan is right, the president was brought down by his own intelligence service.

BOOK REVIEW / Mackubin Thomas Owens

Continued

Unfortunately, the writer does not provide any real motive for such CIA action. To understand why the CIA acted as it did, one has to know that there was a great deal of animosity between the agency and Mr. Nixon dating back to at least 1960. Richard Nixon believed that the CIA had fed information to John F. Kennedy before the presidential debates of that year and had generally favored candidate Kennedy with leaks during the campaign.

Meanwhile, Mr. Nixon had become aware of CIA misdeeds during the Kennedy presidency, including the plan to assassinate Fidel Castro and agency involvement with organized crime in an effort to implement that plan. These points may indicate why the agency would place its own secret agenda above the survival of a viable executive branch.

As Mr. Hougan himself admits, his book leaves many loose ends, and in some cases raises more questions than it answers. But it provides the opportunity to begin a re-examination of Watergate now that passions have cooled.

Those who believe that such a re-examination is not necessary might want to consider how different the political landscape of the Republic and the world at large would be had the Watergate affair not occurred, or had it been defused early in the going.

The executive branch would not have very nearly been destroyed, and with it the ability to articulate and implement a coherent foreign policy.

The fragmentation of authority in Congress might not have been hastened along.

The radical wing of the Democratic Party, buried in 1972, would not have been resurrected by the scandal.

Had there been no Watergate, it is quite conceivable that South Vietnam would still exist as a sovereign political entity, that Afghanistan would not have been invaded, that few Americans would know the names Ayatollah Khomeini or Daniel Ortega. These are reasons enough, it seems, to set the record straight.